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Interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report highlights the activities carried out by key United Nations entities involved in the field of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 61/221. It complements the information contained in the annual progress report of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010 (see A/62/97).

* The report is submitted late in order to reflect recent developments within the United Nations system related to the implementation of General Assembly resolution 61/221.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 61/221, entitled "Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace", the General Assembly affirmed that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace and encouraged initiatives by all actors to promote such dialogue. The Assembly also decided that it would convene in 2007 a high-level dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation and that it would consider declaring one of the coming years as the Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures. The present report is submitted in compliance with the request made in paragraph 17 of the resolution to report to the Assembly at its sixty-second session on the implementation of the resolution.

2. The General Assembly has also before it the annual progress report (see A/62/97) prepared by the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010, submitted in accordance with Assembly resolution 61/45. That comprehensive report includes the activities carried out by the United Nations system to promote and implement the Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace. By doing so, it also covers the implementation of some of the provisions of resolution 61/221 on such issues as human rights and non-discrimination, democratic participation, the role of education to promote tolerance through education and the role of the media.

3. The present report complements the document prepared by UNESCO by adding specific information on activities that promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue in an attempt to report in a comprehensive manner on the implementation of resolution 61/211. It focuses on the activities carried out by major United Nations actors in this field, namely UNESCO, the Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

II. Activities carried out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

4. By means of its programmes, UNESCO aims at promoting cultural diversity through dialogue and by encouraging the personal fulfilment of individuals within all societies, which are nourished by continuous interactions and exchanges. The organization's activities illustrate its efforts to mobilize political will at the highest level in key regions, particularly those marked by intercommunity tensions, such as South-East Europe (for instance, the annual Regional Summit of Heads of State of South-East Europe, in June 2007), while moving towards more practical actions focused on young generations (the UNESCO Children's Performing Arts Festival in East Asia, in August 2007).

5. Guided by General Assembly resolutions, the conclusions and recommendations of the Conference on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustained Initiatives, jointly organized by UNESCO and other international partners in Rabat in June 2005, as well as other important commitments, UNESCO and its member States have formulated an intersectoral action-oriented plan aimed at promoting dialogue throughout its main programmes.

The organization thus contributes to building democratic citizenship and encourages critical acceptance of differences among people. In this framework, UNESCO considers interfaith dialogue as an essential component of a broader intercultural dialogue: faith and creeds are examined as a cultural and social phenomenon which, as such, deserve to be better known and understood in order to avoid simplifications leading to the institutionalization of stereotypes and clichés.

6. From a conceptual point of view, UNESCO considers it important to discuss the epistemology of the term "intercultural dialogue" and to deepen the understanding of its nature and modalities. This conceptual dimension was largely discussed at an expert group meeting, held in Paris from 21 to 23 May 2007, on the occasion of the celebration of the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development (21 May 2007).

7. From a policy perspective, UNESCO takes stock of the existing intercultural dialogue practices in order to assist decision makers in formulating mutually agreed political strategies for cultural pluralism. UNESCO has long worked to accompany member States as they revise and actualize their policies by developing legislation and building capacity in human and cultural resources management. The formulation of appropriate policies requires strategic orientations and operational and methodological frameworks in order to develop appropriate tools for reinforcing intercultural competence. Specific efforts are made to understand what works and what does not work and to explore the contextual, motivational and other factors that lead to a successful dialogue.

8. The Director-General of UNESCO has taken various steps since December 2006 to better respond to the growing demand for the organization's involvement in this field. A task force on the dialogue among cultures has been established in order to determine the follow-up to be provided by UNESCO to the resolutions, recommendations and other action taken by various United Nations actors in the field (United Nations bodies, the governing bodies of UNESCO, the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations and other mechanisms), while forging synergies among them.

9. Regarding the follow-up to be provided to the recommendations contained in the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations, the Director-General of UNESCO expressed to the Secretary-General the Executive Board's great interest in the initiative and its determination to see UNESCO play a leading role in this field, inasmuch as the avenues explored in the report largely coincided with the organization's fields of competence. The UNESCO secretariat also held several meetings with the Alliance secretariat in order to discuss the possibilities for cooperation in the implementation of the recommendations of the report. Monitoring the cooperation with the secretariat of the Alliance of Civilizations is indeed one of the priority tasks of the above-mentioned task force.

10. As a growing number of international actors give a high level of priority to the search for better intercultural communication, the Director-General of UNESCO has pledged to make good use of the agreements concluded with various partners or to establish new memorandums of understanding. Such agreements already exist with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the African Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Council of Europe, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures and the World

Public Forum on Dialogue of Civilizations. Also being considered is the development of agreements with new partners, such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Asia-Europe Meeting, the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture, United Cities and Local Governments, and other regional bodies. Thus, within the framework of the open platform of institutional cooperation for intercultural dialogue, called the "Faro Platform" (Portugal, 2005), UNESCO is cooperating closely with the Council of Europe at the European and Euro-Mediterranean levels, in particular in the production of a "white paper" on intercultural dialogue. In the same way, it is envisaged that UNESCO will collaborate with the European Union for the implementation of the activities planned within the framework of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008).

11. Intercultural dialogue forms an integral part of the draft medium-term strategy (2008-2013) that has been elaborated for UNESCO. Based on the explicit recognition that the promotion of cultural diversity is inseparable from the encouragement of dialogue, the draft strategy includes a specific programme objective on the importance of exchange and dialogue among cultures to social cohesion, reconciliation and peace. The strategic approach includes interfaith dialogue, specific initiatives at the regional and subregional levels, the articulation of a set of commonly shared values and principles, thematic focus on the five fields of competence (education, natural sciences, human and social sciences, culture, and communication and information) of UNESCO, multi-stakeholder involvement and dialogue for advancing women's human rights. With a view to building sustainable bridges for dialogue, the draft strategy foresees, among other things, a focus on quality education in line with the human rights perspective contained in the Dakar Education for All Goals; the sharing of common values in different cultural settings through the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) initiative; the role played by culture in situations of conflict or post-conflict as a vehicle for reconciliation through cultural heritage; and free, independent and pluralistic media in preventing violent conflict and promoting mutual understanding.

III. Activities carried out by the Alliance of Civilizations

12. The Alliance of Civilizations aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions and, in the process, to help counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. The Alliance was established in 2005, at the initiative of the Governments of Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the United Nations. In April 2007, the United Nations Secretary-General appointed Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as High Representative for the Alliance. He is supported by a secretariat office based at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

13. On the basis of the recommendations made in the Alliance of Civilizations High-level Group report, the High Representative developed an action-oriented implementation plan that outlines the Alliance's structure and programme of activities for the coming two years. The plan was released in June 2007 and is available on the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations website.

14. Working in partnership with Governments, international and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations and the private sector, the Alliance

is supporting a range of projects and initiatives, including an online clearing house of best practices, materials and resources on cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation projects. It is also developing a rapid response media mechanism to provide platforms for constructive debate and opinion during times of increased tensions around cross-cultural issues. Moreover, the Alliance is working on several other initiatives, such as a media fund to promote productions developed across cultural, religious and/or national lines and a youth employment centre aimed at increasing work opportunities for young people in the Middle East.

15. The Alliance has developed a "group of friends" network, a growing community that currently comprises 69 States and international organizations that support the objectives of the Alliance and has networked extensively with civil society organizations dedicated to expanding cross-cultural and interfaith understanding and cooperation.

16. The Alliance is preparing for its first international forum, to be held in Spain from 13 to 16 January 2008. The event will begin with a two-day youth forum, followed by a two-day forum for a broader audience that will bring together Governments, international and regional bodies, donor agencies, civil society groups, foundations and representatives from the private sector. The Alliance forum aims to develop joint initiatives and promote projects aimed at improving relations among diverse cultures and communities.

17. The Alliance of Civilizations is funded through a voluntary trust fund made up of contributions from Governments, international organizations and entities, private sector bodies, foundations and individuals. It is currently staffing up as foreseen in the implementation plan in order to accomplish the above-mentioned goals.

18. A yearly report on the activities of the Alliance will be presented by the High Representative to the Secretary-General. More information about the Alliance and the Alliance of Civilizations Implementation Plan can be found on the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations website (www.unaoc.org).

IV. Activities carried out by the United Nations Population Fund

19. The work of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) provides an action-oriented and rights-based perspective to interreligious and intercultural dialogue through its decades-long legacy of engaging with religious leaders and faith-based organizations. These engagements cover the mandated issues of UNFPA: population dynamics (for example, urbanization, migration) reproductive health and gender equality. In the field, the Fund provides support through capacity-building and advocacy to faith-based agents of change. It builds its outreach to these critical agents by way of selective collaboration.

20. Since the adoption of resolution 61/221 by the General Assembly, UNFPA has continued its ongoing legacy, contributing to interreligious and intercultural dialogue through programmes at the country and regional levels. In this regard, listed below are a number of the Fund's case studies.

21. In Bangladesh, UNFPA has supported the training of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist religious leaders in promoting gender equality, reproductive health and

rights. Through public communication channels, such as their religious sermons and ceremonies, these leaders have become educators and advocates, speaking out against gender-based violence and raising awareness on HIV/AIDS prevention.

22. In Honduras, UNFPA developed the Inter-ecclesiastical Committee on HIV/AIDS Prevention, which brings together leaders and representatives of the Catholic, Evangelical, Episcopalian and Adventist Churches as well as the Ministry of Health and the theological community. The Committee meets regularly and organizes forums and discussions on their churches' responses to HIV and AIDS. Thus far, it has organized four inter-ecclesiastical forums on HIV/AIDS prevention throughout the country. The objective of the forums is to encourage a common religious approach for dealing with those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

23. In Uganda, UNFPA collaborates with the Interreligious Council of Uganda, which draws together the Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox Churches as well as the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council to work on areas of common interest. In partnership with the Fund, the Council advocates for gender equality and reproductive health issues, such as natural family planning and adolescent health.

24. In the area of indigenous issues and human rights, UNFPA has promoted and consolidated two intercultural theme groups on the programmatic mainstreaming of indigenous issues as part of the United Nations country team's initiatives in Ecuador and Bolivia. In collaboration with the intercultural theme group of Ecuador, the Fund facilitated the country visit of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples and contributed to the constitution of an Advisory Committee on Indigenous Issues. In Bolivia, UNFPA led the intercultural theme group, alongside the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the other United Nations agencies, in establishing a National Council for the Dialogue of the United Nations System with Indigenous Peoples. The Council advises the United Nations country team on strategies to promote and guarantee the human rights of indigenous peoples with due respect to their world views.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

25. **As exemplified by the information provided above, the United Nations system has carried out extensive activities that promote dialogue among cultures and religions and is increasingly mobilized to contribute to that objective. Such activities usefully complement initiatives taken by Member States and other international actors to foster dialogue, such as the Interfaith Dialogue held at the Third Asia-Europe Meeting in Nanjing, China, last June or the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace.**

26. **The annual reports of the High Representative on the Alliance of Civilizations to the Secretary-General will contain proposals for further action by the United Nations in this field. Meanwhile, the General Assembly may wish to decide on an International Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures, as foreseen in resolution 61/221.**

27. **Concerning the designation of a focal unit in the Secretariat, as requested in resolution 61/221, the Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs is mandated to interact with the**

United Nations system entities and to coordinate their contribution to the intergovernmental process, which it has been doing on culture-related issues over the past years. The Office is accordingly designated to play this focal point role and, in that capacity, to liaise with relevant United Nations system entities.